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Eric H. Zimak

Ohio University - Main Campus

Katie M. Edwards

University of New Hampshire, katie.edwards@unh.edu

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Now or Later?: Deciding when to Pursue a Doctorate Degree in Psychology

Eric H. Zimak, M.S. and Katie M. Edwards, M.S.

Seniors pursuing an undergraduate psychology degree are often overwhelmed by feelings of confusion and anxiety over whether they should apply immediately to doctoral programs in psychology or take time off before applying. When making this decision, students frequently consider whether they have sufficient research and applied experience, personal motivation, work ethic, resourcefulness to succeed, and the financial means to matriculate.

Despite the importance of this decision and the emotions often surrounding it, little research has been conducted in this area. In fact, after an extensive review of the literature, we were unable to locate any published national data regarding the percentage of psychology doctoral students who enter graduate studies in psychology immediately after graduating from their undergraduate institution and the percentage who take time off before pursuing graduate study. There is also a paucity of scholarly discussion on the decision making process, and the weighing of pros and cons, in which prospective doctoral students often engage. Accordingly, the purpose of this brief article is to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of matriculating immediately to graduate school in comparison to taking time off before pursuing graduate study in psychology. Although all of what follows is based on our personal experiences and narratives of our colleagues, it will be important for future researchers to examine this decision-making process more carefully.

Going Directly from Undergraduate

PROS:

Graduate school provides an intellectually stimulating environment, where dedicated students can continue to develop their academic, research, and professional skills. Rather than committing to a career immediately after undergrad, many graduating seniors may benefit from the opportunity to continue in academics, albeit in a more professional setting (Committee on the College Student Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 2000). These students may also find the academic transition to graduate school easier than those who wait, benefiting from recent experience with web-based learning and research, filling out financial aid applications, and relevant coursework. Furthermore, they are provided with the many benefits of living in a university community, receiving access to social and academic opportunities, such as attending sporting events, concerts, lectures, and colloquiums. Additionally, students entering a doctorate program after immediately completing an undergraduate education will likely receive their doctorate at a younger age, allowing them an opportunity to begin their professional career in their late 20s or early 30s.

CONS:

There are also drawbacks to applying to doctorate programs as a senior in college. Although seniors may be prepared "on paper," they may lack the necessary personal characteristics, such as motivation, emotional maturity, and a stellar work ethic, all of which are necessary to succeed in graduate school. Graduate school often requires geographical relocation and students may not be comfortable moving away from their family of origin, a relationship partner, or even their college friends. Furthermore, graduate school can be a taxing financial experience. Students should consider whether they would like to start paying off accumulated undergraduate debt or potentially accrue more debt by spending 5-7 years in a doctorate program.

There are also many difficulties associated with applying to graduate school while concurrently embarking on an undergraduate education. Grades may suffer from numerous weekends off to attend interviews, and social life with friends may take a back seat to the demands of the application process. The graduating senior may consider whether he/she prefers spending his/her last year in college working to finish academic requirements while simultaneously engaging in the time-consuming and taxing graduate school application process.

Taking Time Off After Graduating

PROS:

Taking time off before pursuing a graduate degree in psychology can give students an opportunity to improve their preparedness for graduate school by gaining research or applied experience, improving their GPA and GRE scores, and developing better writing skills. For example, students interested in clinical or counseling psychology can hone their applied skills by volunteering or interning at a rape crisis center or inpatient hospital setting after graduating, while students preferring quantitative psychology could build their application by taking additional statistic courses or working as an assistant to a statistical consultant. Further, Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, and Hansen (2002) suggest that quality interactions with faculty mentors may greatly increase preparedness to succeed in graduate school. Accordingly, taking extra time off could afford applicants the opportunity to further develop these supportive, mentoring relationships, as students could continue their involvement in research laboratories following graduation.

Additionally, students who are the least bit unsure can use the interim to gain similar applied and/or research experience, or perhaps even enter a master's program, to make sure that they truly desire pursuing a doctorate degree in psychology. Furthermore, some individuals could benefit from additional time evaluating the type of programs they would prefer, by considering issues such as the

stipend offered, the social atmosphere, and geographic setting. Given the financial constraints associated with graduate training, many individuals could use the extra time to save money in order to reduce the loans accrued during graduate work. Finally, due to the intensity and difficulty of graduate programs, students may benefit from years of experience and maturity in handling life's many stressors.

CONS:

As individuals grow older, social and personal barriers to pursuing a graduate degree may increase. The following questions may arise for a student beginning his/her graduate education in his/her late 20s or early 30s: (1) do I have the consummate motivation to succeed?; (2) can I learn new material as quickly as I did when I was younger?; (3) is it worth my effort to begin a doctoral education, given the length of time needed to complete it?; (4) and for those with families, will I have enough money and time to support a family? Moreover, graduate schools may question how the individual spent his/her time before applying. For example, an adult who graduated with a degree in psychology, but has spent the last 10 years of her life as a sales representative, may be questioned as to his/her desire and motivation and ability to pursue a graduate degree in psychology. As a final point, receiving recommendation letters from appropriate individuals after being removed from an academic setting is often difficult. It is important to note that although there may be some logistical barriers to pursuing a graduate degree after taking time off, it is by no means impossible.

Conclusion

In sum, the decision to pursue a doctorate in psychology immediately after completing an undergraduate education or to wait a few years is a difficult and complicated process. This article demonstrates that there are advantages and disadvantages to each decision and that the "right" decision varies from person to person. Taking our list of pros and cons into consideration, we suggest that potential applicants develop their own list of pros and cons and discuss it with academic mentors, professors, career counselors, graduate students, and/or family members in order to gain multiple perspectives. Ultimately, however, this life-changing decision will be yours to make.

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Eric Zimak is a third year graduate student in the clinical psychology doctoral program at Ohio University. His research currently focuses on the neuropsychological and risk-taking correlates of developmental disorders. Other research interests include facilitation of sexual assault risk reduction programs, exploring the cognitive correlates of sexual perpetration, and understanding factors related to matriculating to graduate school. Eric can be reached at ez331705@ohio.edu with any questions.

Katie Edwards is a graduate student in the clinical psychology doctoral program at Ohio University. Her professional interests include the causes, consequences, and prevention of intimate partner violence in addition to the ethical considerations of trauma research and therapy with women currently in abusive relationships. Katie can be reached at ke264505@ohio.edu with any questions.